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MUNICIPAL EMPLOYMENT OF UNEMPLOYED WOMEN IN LONDON

Experiments in social legislation, dealing as they do with the lives and fortunes of human beings, are too costly to be undertaken often, or without a serious forecast of the consequences that possible failure may bring, not only to the individual but to the state; not only to this generation but to the next. "In dealing with the man," the *Report of the Unemployed Fund* wisely points out, "the committee is also dealing with posterity." It might therefore be regarded as a part of our social duty to study the working-out of such experiments when they are offered to us, gratuitously as it were, with the costs to be paid by another nation.

England has been furnishing one such experiment in its recent attempts to deal with the so-called "unemployed" and attempts to provide for this class are of rather special importance because they so often spell relief that they threaten to cause more evil than they cure. In the past few years, London has brought much money and sympathy, and what is more rare, thought and intelligent effort to bear upon this question, and she has much to teach us that we could not learn from our own extensive experiments of 1893-94. For we were facing a sudden and appalling industrial crisis, and adopted makeshift plans in panic-stricken dismay; while in England, settled machinery under the control of the Local Government Board has been set up by act of Parliament, and we have the opportunity of study-

ing an experiment planned for three years instead of a few months. It is my purpose in the present paper to review only that part of the experiment which has had to do with unemployed women, and it will be well perhaps to begin with a brief discussion of the general problem of unemployment in relation to women's work, particularly women's work in London, and its likeness or unlikeness to the problem of unemployment for men.

Any depression which creates a general condition of "exceptional distress," for which in England the Unemployed Workman Act was designed, will affect working women in two ways. It first affects them directly, as it does men, through the loss of their situations, and women accustomed to regular work and likely to be again in regular work when trade shall recover, may be legitimately called "unemployed workmen." They are really in the same condition as the men; for although they may not be doing the same work, their fortunes are dependent on the same industry, and they go up or down together.

Then, secondly, women are indirectly affected through an increase in the supply of workers just at the time when demand has fallen off. Women who are supported by their husbands or male relatives in "good times" are driven into the labor market when "times are hard" and work is most scarce. There is, in consequence, an especially keen competition in women's occupations during any kind of a trade depression.

A further point not to be overlooked is that there is among women, as well as among men, a large class composed of those who are chronically irregularly employed and who have been called the "underemployed," to distinguish them from the "unemployed," but who in times of distress are vaguely numbered with the latter and whose existence confuses the problem and complicates every attempt to deal with it. While women are happily excluded from that large class of "general laborers" who get a day's work when they can at the docks or some similar place, there is nevertheless plenty of casual labor which is exclusively women's work and which is quite as demoralizing as the present system of dock labor is for men. Such is the work, for example, in jam, "sweets," and rope factories, and more impor-

tant still are charing, washing, and unskilled needlework. Even in the better grade dressmaking, millinery, and allied trades, there is the inevitable seasonal slackness. In some of these industries the women in the rougher sort of occupations are taken on for casual work in much the same way as are the unskilled men at the docks; a large number gather about the door at six o'clock in the morning, and from these the foreman, when he appears, selects the most likely. If there is a prospect that more hands may be needed later in the morning, another crowd will assemble at nine o'clock and a second selection be made. This class of "underemployed" women is unquestionably large in London, and it is greatly increased in periods of slack trade by recruits from the class of occasional workers mentioned above. It is this class, moreover, that many people have in mind when they talk about "unemployed women" and what ought to be done for them. But there can be no clear thinking nor right doing on this subject until chronic "underemployment," the normal unemployment of good times, be distinguished from that abnormal unemployment that the better class of working women fall into only in periods of bad trade, and which, in the language of the act, is due to exceptional causes over which they have no control.¹ The condition of those women who suffer from irregular employment in times of prosperity as well as distress is to be explained, not by exceptional causes, but by chronic causes—lack of intelligence and energy, lack of training, lack of ambition, and a willingness to accept the lot of casual labor which public opinion condones because when the girl is young the possibility of a release from it all through marriage looms large in the background, and when she is old, her incompetency seems too hopeless to remedy.

When the question of dealing with women as a part of the unemployed problem arises, two difficulties are almost sure to be met at the outset. One of these is the fact that most of the ordinary schemes for employing the unemployed presuppose that all of the unemployed are men. Work on streets, parks, roads, and other municipal undertakings, as well as such special

¹ Unemployed Workman Act, 5 Edw. VII, chap. 18, § 3.

schemes as the establishment of farm colonies, becomes the subject of plans which are likely first to absorb a committee appointed to deal with this subject. In London the work decided upon was said to be such as "any ordinary workman could undertake," but neither ordinary nor extraordinary working women can be set at the former group of employments, and it is next to impossible to share the latter with them. The only alternative is that a quite different and special kind of work be invented for women, and to get that undertaken, the committee must first be persuaded that there are unemployed women who are entitled to consideration. This brings us to a second point: the lack of public sympathy with the unemployed woman or belief in her, because of her relation to the vexed problem of domestic service. The current opinion is that there need never be any unemployed women if they were not perversely indifferent to the charms of domestic service. The man whose wife is distracted for want of a housemaid or cook is likely to be very firm in his refusal to give time, money, or sympathy to an effort to create artificial work for unemployed women.

Such a position as this, however, assumes the premise that domestic service is a standing alternative employment to which all women at all times could, if they only would, turn with certainty. But this premise, I believe, is by no means so universally true as people are inclined to believe. When a young girl first goes to work, she probably has the alternative of choosing service away from home or factory work that still leaves her free to live with her own family. It surely, however, is her right at that time to choose freely which she shall do. Domestic service has no divinely appointed claims, and certainly in our democratic republic few enough attractions.

But if domestic service figures prominently as a universal alternative employment for young girls, the case alters after they have worked in a factory for a term of years, as it does also for deserted wives or for widows with small children. It is pretty well acknowledged that the average London factory girl cannot be turned into a servant for the few months of a trade depression with any such degree of success as to make the experiment

worth trying. Even with us where the factory girl is far superior in education and ability and may in general be said to be a worker of higher grade than in London, it has been almost impossible to make the transition satisfactorily from factory work to house work.² This will be explained by the prejudiced as due to a temperamental unwillingness on the part of the girls to adjust themselves, but the more fair-minded observer sees that it is not easy for girls suddenly to leave their homes and take up a new occupation, when the habits of work that are in a high degree mechanical have become fixed and have greatly diminished the quality of adaptability which is so essential, if domestic service is to be either a tolerable or a successful employment. The woman of twenty-five, for example, who has acquired considerable manual dexterity in some factory occupation, and who can earn good wages in normal times, may be in some measure at least justified in her reluctance to serve a new apprenticeship and to begin again as an unskilled servant, when she has every reason to hope that trade will soon revive and her old work be again open to her. While it is true that the demand for servants is unique in the labor market for women, in that it constantly exceeds the supply—and so greatly exceeds the supply that a girl with very inadequate training can almost always get some sort of a place—yet the average London factory hand has had no training at all. She was born and has always lived in a house in which no domestic work has ever been properly done. This is of course an unpleasant fact, but facts are frequently unpleasant and they must be reckoned with nevertheless. It is essentially just that every “unemployed committee” should adopt as one of its fundamental rules the principle that

² Of recent memory to some Boston women in this connection is the experiment tried at the time of the last weavers' strike in Fall River, when something over a hundred and fifty of the girls who were idle there were brought in and placed at service in or near Boston. But although special interest was taken in these girls by those who sympathized with them, and places were found for them where the ordinary untrained girl would not have been taken, the experiment was far from successful. The girls were unsatisfactory as servants and correspondingly unhappy, and a recent inquiry showed that not more than six had remained in service.

no work shall be given to domestic servants who claim to be out of work, or to women and girls who can be placed in service, but when this has been done, it becomes a futile question to ask of those who remain, "Why don't they go into service?"

It should be emphasized that I have only tried to point out that a trade depression is quite as likely to produce bona fide unemployed women as unemployed men. What I have not maintained is the further point that public workshops are necessary to provide for either the men or the women of this class during any ordinary period of trade depression. On the contrary, I believe that experiments with the unemployed have commonly tended to produce evidence that the unemployed are not only able to provide for themselves either with their own savings or out-of-work benefits of trade-unions, or in some other way, but that they prefer to do so rather than to apply for the assistance offered through state-provided relief works. So far as the women are concerned, the account of what was done under the recent English act, and of the class of women who responded with a demand for work, furnishes interesting testimony on this point.

The Unemployed Workman Act of 1905³ succeeded to the organization of 1904-05 known as the "London Unemployed Fund," and followed it closely in the establishment of its working machinery by adopting the plan of a central committee and representative local committees. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is only necessary to say that this earlier organization did not attempt any special work for women. The Women's Industrial Council was on the alert at the time to press the claims of working women to be recognized as "genuine unemployed workmen," but their deputation was not received until the committee had spent all of its funds on schemes for employing the men. When the Unemployed Workman Act was passed, it clearly included women as well as men, and in the principles laid down by the Local Government Board to be observed by the various committees, it was prescribed that in all respects applica-

³ 5 Edw. VII, chap. 18.

tions from women were to receive the same attention as those from men.⁴

At the first meeting of the Central Unemployed Body, November 23, 1905, it was decided to form a women's work committee, but for various reasons its formation was delayed. However, a share in the provisions of this act which was to last for three years was worth fighting for, and the council was again active, demanding that the working woman's right to benefit under its provisions should not be disregarded. In December, 1905, it issued a memorandum addressed to the Central Body and the local committees, which was interesting because of the various relief measures suggested as practicable for women. Nothing was done however until the Women's Work Committee (J. Ramsay MacDonald, M. P., chairman) met for the first time February 10, 1906. It was then decided that a workroom should be established where clothing and other articles that were needed for the farm colonies and for emigrants' outfits could be made, and "distress committees" in London were asked to submit investigated applications which they recommended as suitable for assistance.⁵ But at this time only 388 women had registered.⁶ That seemed an absurdly small number compared with the thousands of clamoring male applicants, but it should not be forgotten that the number of women wage earners is small compared with the total number of men, and that the largest group among women gainfully employed is that of "domestic servants," who do not and should not apply. There are, moreover, other reasons which explain this small registration. Women do not learn of the existence of such things as "unemployed bodies" so

⁴ See *Preliminary Report upon the Work of the Central (Unemployed) Body for London* (London, 1906), p. 3.

⁵ The principle of "investigation and verification" had already been established and followed in the case of men.

⁶ This was, of course, only the number registered in London, but when the registers were closed in the spring (1906) more than 35,000 men had registered in the same area. (See "Preliminary Report," *op. cit.*, p. 83.) The West Ham Distress Committee ascertained that the number of women registered by the various committees both outside and inside of London (two committees only failing to respond to their inquiry) was 1,340. (See *First Annual Report of West Ham Distress Committee*, p. 22.)

quickly as men, and it was the first season that any attempt to deal with unemployed women had been undertaken. So that while relief works were an old story to the men, women were just beginning to learn of the possibility of resorting to "distress committees."⁷ It must further be noted that while it had been officially declared by the Local Government Board that applications would be received from women, it was generally known that although many schemes of work for men were on foot, no plan for women was under consideration. This not only deterred women who knew of the act from applying, but various organizations interested in women of this class refrained from advising those who were ignorant of their rights to apply, since it would have been merely raising "groundless hopes."⁸ The "Preliminary Report"⁹ suggested the further reason that for some classes of women workers the time when exceptional distress from unemployment is most probable is not during the winter months, but from August to November.

But, however this small registration may be explained, the fact remains that in the face of it, the committee could not consider any proposal for a women's farm colony or for their employment on the colonies already established for men. Although the various committees were asked especially to emphasize, on all notices, the fact that women were eligible to register, when the registers were closed in April for the season, the number of applicants was still so small as not to justify the Central Unemployed Body in attempting any general scheme of employment.

⁷ Attention is called in the "Preliminary Report" (*op. cit.*, p. 51) to the fact that this has been "the first season in which any organized attempt to deal with unemployed women has been made. This fact affected both the number and the character of the applications and the cases recommended by the Distress Committees. The work of this season has been experimental in a far higher degree even than that of dealing with unemployed men."

⁸ After the workrooms had been finally established, it was known that the number accommodated was very small, and this again was a discouraging influence, and for those who might have advised women in need of assistance to make applications, the fact that the training of the workrooms was of so little value had a further deterrent effect.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

Local initiative was therefore invited with the promise that the Central Body would finance such of the submitted schemes as they approved. It was hoped that local needs would be met in this way, and "experience be gained which would be useful in the future." Two committees only were sufficiently interested to make such proposals. Hampstead suggested a central depot for work to be given out to be done at home, but the Women's Work Committee were too unfavorably disposed toward "home work" to assent to such a proposal. Poplar had already created a Women's Work Sub-Committee, and they were prepared with the outline of a scheme, which was approved for a small local workroom, which would provide for twenty women for five weeks at an experimental workroom in a Canning Town settlement.¹⁰ At the end of this time the work was withdrawn from the settlement, as a result of the decision that any further experiments or expenditure on the employment of women should be made under the direct supervision of the Women's Work Committee.

By July 1, 1906, practically at the close of the first year of its existence, the Central Body definitely undertook, as a part of its work, the provision of workshops for women. The two important questions to be raised at this point then are: (1) How was the term "unemployed women" defined by the Central Body? i. e., precisely which class of women did they professedly include or exclude? and (2) Did the class for whom the work was provided respond with a demand for the work?

In a circular issued in connection with the opening of the registeries for women we find the answer to the first question. The act, it is said, includes "temporarily unemployed women who are usually self-supporting," and excludes those women who are "only in a normal condition of underemployment or underpaid employment;" and specifically excluded also are

¹⁰ This was especially easy to carry out, for the machinery already existed as the result of a private undertaking at the settlement. The work was only financed for the time being by the Central Body, and the head resident of the settlement continued to supervise it as she had done before, making only such alterations in her plan as were necessary in changing it from a private to a quasi-public enterprise.

women whose "temporary unemployment is due to ordinary seasonal causes." That is, the woman, like the man for whom the act was designed, was the "independent workman" usually in regular work but suffering from distress due to her being temporarily idle from exceptional causes over which she had no control. The woman who was suffering from chronic under-employment, seasonal employment, or low-paid employment, or who had been depending upon relatives, charity, or the poor-law, however "deserving" she might be, was plainly declared not to be within the meaning of the act. It was also pointed out that the case of a woman with a husband or grown son who ought really to be the bread-winner must be excluded, for obviously the husband or son should register and be dealt with directly by the committee.

Three workrooms only were opened, one in Poplar, one in Camberwell, and a third in St. Pancras, but they were open to women who might be recommended by any of the twenty-nine distress committees in London, and approved by the Central Body. At the St. Pancras workroom, tailoring is done, the principal part of the work being the making of suits for the boys and men who are emigrated by the committee. At Poplar the work is chiefly the making of undergarments, women's and children's clothing, and men's shirts. At Camberwell much the same work is done, and both there and at Poplar a little hand-knitting machine is used for making socks. The garments are made largely by hand. Very few of the women know how to use a machine, and in most respects the rooms are of course quite unlike those which provide for a bona fide market. The experiment has been kept on a small scale, the three rooms together accommodating only 116 women, but these women have been given work continuously for sixteen weeks, and in a few cases, in which a special application for an extension of time has been approved by the Local Government Board, for twenty-four weeks.

The pay for this artificial work is determined according to the number of dependent children that the woman has to provide for, and the earnings of her children who are at work. The

rate is ten shillings for the woman herself,¹¹ two shillings for the first child under fourteen, one and sixpence for the second, and a shilling for each remaining child under this age; but in no case is more than seventeen shillings and sixpence to be paid, and a deduction of one-fourth of the earnings of each child over fourteen is made.¹² In addition to their wages the women are given their dinners and tea, and their carfares are paid. The working-week is forty-eight hours.

Passing on now to the second question regarding the class of women who registered for this work, it can best be answered by a study of the statistics of the 734 applications received by the distress committees up to January, 1907. These applications were classified as to age, occupations, and condition as to marriage as follows:

STATISTICS OF WOMEN APPLICANTS FOR "UNEMPLOYED" WORK

Ages		Occupations	
Under 21	7	Charwomen	193
21 and under 31	54	Needlewomen	125
31 and under 41	165	Domestics	75
41 and under 51	270	Laundry Workers	51
51 and under 61	181	Cooks	43
61 and over	57	Dressmakers	29
	734	Machinists	24
		Office cleaners	22
Conjugal Condition		Nurses	20
Widows	504	Factory hands	16
Married	103	Housekeepers	11
Separated or deserted	25	Other occupations	125
Single	102		
	734		734

¹¹ It must, of course, be kept in mind, that women's wages are much lower in London than in America, but this pay for "unemployed work" is perhaps a little under the current market rate for needlework there. This is as it should be, however, in accordance with the principle that such work should not be made unduly attractive—a principle difficult to maintain with regard to these work-rooms, for although the wages may be fixed below the market rate, yet the latter presupposes work properly done, while very little of this work is properly done. Moreover, if the applicants come from the "underemployed" class, the regularity of state-provided work, even at a lower wage, makes it more desirable.

¹² This is an extremely difficult provision to enforce, due to the fact that the women never seem really to understand it and report not what their children earn, but what they give. Distress committees should meet this difficulty by verifying children's earnings, but they have evidently not done so.

This table shows pretty clearly that the women who registered in London belonged for the most part to the "underemployed" class, and it may seem strange that after the committee had in such unmistakable terms excluded this class, 612 of these applicants should have been pronounced "eligible and suitable for treatment under the act." One would have thought that all of the 118 "domestics" and "cooks" would have been rejected on the well-established ground that it is not the duty of the community to provide artificial work for domestic servants; and in most of the other occupations, e. g., charwomen, needlewomen, laundry workers, office cleaners, we have a class of women whose work is normally irregular, and who are, therefore, of the class specifically declared by the committee to be ineligible for assistance in its circular regarding the registration of women. It is to be expected that in such occupations we should find, as we do find, that the women are chiefly widows, and that most of them are more than forty years old. The committee's problem became, in short, the old problem of the unskilled working woman who, while she is young and has quick limbs and nimble fingers, can support herself at a variety of unskilled factory occupations. But when she is left a widow with children requiring care, her health more or less impaired, her hands stiff, to return to the work that she did before marriage is out of the question, and she is reduced to charring or "slop" needlework, as almost her only means of support.

All of this is not saying that these women are not "deserving"—that question does not arise here—it is only pointing out that, however deserving or unfortunate, the committee was nevertheless dealing with the class who are in a chronic state of underemployment and underpaid employment, and that it was precisely this class that the act was not designed to aid. This table, as has been said, deals only with those women who made application for work, and along with it should be given a similar table dealing with those out of this number who were actually given work—308 in all during the first year. The records of the work-rooms had unfortunately not been kept in such a manner as to make the compilation of such a table possible, but the cards of

fifty-two of the women who are in the workrooms this summer were kindly placed at my disposal. On these were recorded the ages, condition as to marriage, and the occupations of the women as the latter described them. The following table was prepared from these cards:

WOMEN IN THE "UNEMPLOYED" WORKROOMS, JULY, 1907

Ages		Occupations— <i>Continued</i>	
Under 20	0	Needlework and laundry	
20 and under 30	3	work	2
30 and under 40	7	Charing	5
40 and under 50	21	Charing and washing	1
50 and under 60	19	Charing, washing, and um-	
60 to 70	2	brella making	1
	52	Charing and nursing	1
Conjugal Condition		Domestic service	5
Widows	41	General housework and	
Widows; deserted	2	washing	1
Wives; husbands ill	5	Daily housework	1
Single	4	Occasional nursing	1
	52	Cook	1
Occupations		"Cook, etc,"	1
Needlework	14	Bottle-washing and plain	
Charing and needlework	7	needlework	1
Needlework and house-		Laundress	1
work	2	Tailoress	1
Needlework and cooking	1	Boot-upper-fitter	1
Needlework and nursing	1	Occupations not given	2
Needlework, nursing, and			52
housekeeping	1		

This table shows for the women who were given work the same characteristics as the earlier one did for the whole group of applicants. Here only four out of fifty-two were single women, and forty-two out of fifty-two were between the ages of forty and seventy. This second list of occupations differs from the first in being less condensed and therefore more instructive. I simplified very little their own statements on their cards, eliminating only the things they added as being "willing to do." It shows, therefore, even more clearly than the other how very casual their work was—for a woman who describes her work as "charing and needlework," or "charing and washing and umbrella making," or "bottle-washing and plain needlework," could not even by a far stretch of the imagination be said to belong to the class of "genuine unemployed workmen."

It can, I believe, be fairly said that among women as among men, the class for whom the act was created have not utilized it. The act has not been able, therefore, to fulfil its original purpose. The main justification for its existence was that it would be essentially a preventive measure. It would save the man or woman ordinarily in regular work from the demoralizing effects of joining the ranks of casual labor, but those who applied were already members of this army. The act could not save them from losing an independence that they did not have, nor help them to recover an industrial status they had never lost. It could not bridge the interval between two regular "jobs" for those whose working life was a hand to mouth struggle with "odd jobs."¹³ The question that logically follows is: Since the act failed in its original purpose, has it not perhaps served some other equally useful one. The committee is certainly not to be censured for using machinery invented for the unemployed for the benefit of a different class, if those for whom it was designed did not apply. But the needs of the two classes are not the same, and the question must be raised whether this machinery was equally adapted to assist the class which used it, or whether it ought not to have been radically altered to fit their different needs. The workrooms were planned as a means of "tiding over" the unemployed; in lieu of this it may be asked, what have they done for the underemployed?

The result seems to have been that a few inefficient old char-women have temporarily had regular work, have been better fed, learned to sew a little, and allowed to work in peace without any drive or without the fear of being out of work tomorrow. They

¹³ This is a difficulty of long standing with regard to measures for the relief of unemployment. Witness, for example, this statement from the report of the Board of Trade on earlier experiments of this sort: "To sum up, the special danger which temporary schemes of municipal employment have to face is that they may fail to attract the class of unemployed whose distress is merely caused by temporary difficulties over which the individuals have no control, while they are unlikely to be organized and administered with sufficient completeness and elasticity to be of service for the lasting assistance or information of the chronically idle and incapable." Labor Department of the Board of Trade, *Report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the Unemployed*, C. 7,182 (1893), p. 237.

have in short been given a new kind of relief, a "dole of work," and the fact that it was a sixteen-weeks' dole makes it no better in principle than a three-days' dole, unless their permanent condition has been altered. They were industrial dependents in the beginning and when they leave the workroom they are still dependent.¹⁴ They have, of course, learned something, but the essential thing is that what they have learned must have a commercial value. The cause of their dependence is their industrial inefficiency in the labor market. The only remedy is to give them a different status there by increasing the value of what they have to offer. It has been hoped, I believe, that the workrooms might do this, but it is only too patent that, as they are at present organized, it is quite impossible; and the hope seems to be entirely based on the fact that a very few exceptional women have been able to learn enough to get work upon leaving, which it is hoped may prove regular, but the number who have been helped in this way is so small a proportion of the total that it may fairly be called negligible.¹⁵ The workrooms to begin with are not

¹⁴ This again is only verifying the results of previous experiences. See the Board of Trade Report (*op. cit.*, p. 409) in which it is pointed out with regard to the men who were given work, "The relief work with which they are provided is, to many of them, merely one out of the series of casual jobs by which they are accustomed to live, and when it is over they are in the same position as when it began. They have been supported for a few days, but they have not been set on their feet."

¹⁵ These few cases have, moreover, probably been legitimate cases within the meaning of the act, that is, belonging to a class above the underemployed, —certainly on the borderland, if not "genuine unemployed" workmen. Pretty careful inquiry showed the following results: (1) The case of a woman who had done machining on belts used in the army, but when a new kind of belt was adopted that did not require stitching she lost what had been a position of bona fide regular work. The workrooms helped her to tide over the period of readjustment, and fortunately her knowledge of the machine gave her an advantage in the tailoring work. She was accustomed to work quickly and regularly, and was so ambitious that there was every prospect that she would be in a position to obtain regular work again when she should leave the workroom; (2) the case of a boot-upper-fitter who lost her work through the introduction of new machinery. She had been industrially independent and was very capable, and will probably be able to get regular work at some kind of tailoring when she leaves. Two other cases which were reported to me were similar to the first, in that the women had been used to machinery. These cases were all most exceptional. Had they been typical, they would of course, have proved the workrooms to be serving a very different purpose.

equipped or managed primarily with a view to teaching women a trade, and many of the women there, charwomen who do not even know how to hold a needle, would be in any event incapable of learning one. Work is done by hand that in a factory would be done by machine; emphasis is laid, for example, in the tailoring department on the fact that a woman is taught (or an attempt made to teach her!) to make "a whole coat"—precisely the thing that she is not called upon to do in a factory which is turning out ready-made coats for the market, and which demands good machinists, or good basters, but not women who know something about making all parts of a bad coat.¹⁶ It might also be said that the training to be gained from running an antiquated hand-knitting machine is, to put it mildly, of doubtful value.

It would be, of course, unfair to minimize the difficulties with which the workrooms have had to deal, or to reproach them for not achieving the impossible—and to make tailoresses out of incompetent old ladies of sixty, or fifty, or even forty-five in sixteen weeks or any longer period is obviously impossible. The women who have been given work have been almost hopelessly inefficient; but this is precisely one of the points in the administration that is most open to criticism. Granted that charwomen cannot be turned into tailoresses, then surely it is an unjustifiable waste to attempt to teach women of this class who, to use their own words, have "never held a needle," to make coats, or even shirts! There is, on the face of it at least, no less with the men's work than with women's, a failure to deal frankly with the problem in hand. It would have seemed so much better to declare openly that the workrooms, since they had been taken over by the under-employed, must be put on a new basis to meet the needs of that class. It has been pointed out that the primary need of these women is industrial training, and if the workrooms cannot be

¹⁶ I was interested to notice on returning from a visit to one of these workrooms last spring two large clothing factories, both of which advertised on the doors for "hands" of various sorts, machinists, basters, "trouser hands," etc. It was clear, of course, that it was not lack of employment, but lack of ability on the part of the women to meet the demands of the market, that was the difficulty. It was equally clear that the workrooms could not prepare them to meet that demand.

made to furnish this, there is not much excuse for continuing them. One of the first steps in any event would be rigidly to exclude the "unhelpables," to make it a rule that none of the underemployed be given work, unless the commercial value of their industrial capacity stood a fair chance of being improved. This would make the important point in the investigation of women applicants their ability to profit by such training as the workrooms could offer, and the majority of the present occupants would under such circumstances be excluded. This may seem like a very hard-hearted doctrine indeed, but in the treatment of social invalids, as in the treatment of other invalids, what may seem harsh is only kind; and at the worst it can only mean that the women who are refused work must be given charitable assistance of some sort today instead of tomorrow. Most of the women over fifty, and all of those over sixty would be refused work. In short, the workrooms would be frankly metamorphosed into widow's polytechnics—glorified training-schools, if you will, for women too old to enter "trade classes for girls," but still young enough in adaptability, if not in years, either to learn some new work or to learn to do their old work much better. Of course if one must go on pretending that the workrooms are for a class that has shown no sign of wanting them, they will continue to serve neither one purpose nor the other. But how much better if the committee, on the basis of the past year's experience, were squarely to acknowledge that the problem before it had become that of "underemployment" rather than unemployment, and alter its machinery to serve the real demand that exists instead of the fictitious demand that was believed to exist.

It may be objected with regard to all of this that after the "unhelpables" have been weeded out, the numbers remaining would be so small that it would be useless to waste so much time and money on them; but the point is that time and money are already being spent, and it is only a question of spending it to some purpose or none. Moreover the numbers would increase as the new character of the work and its new possibilities became known, not only among the women themselves, but among agencies organized to help them, some of which have refrained

hitherto from sending women there because the training was of such doubtful value.

In conclusion, it may be said that it has seemed worth while to review this experiment in some detail, as an attempt on the part of an important public body to undertake what it called "the comparatively novel and particularly difficult task of dealing with unemployed women." This work, at the end of the first year, was said to have "been experimental in a far higher degree even than that of dealing with unemployed men." In its first summary, the Central Body called attention to the small number of applications received from women as the most striking feature of this part of the work.¹⁷ But although the number was small, there were, as has been pointed out, reasonable explanations for it. Moreover the significant and interesting thing, I believe, is not that the number of applications was so small, but that the applications came so uniformly from one class. This obviously does not prove that unemployed women who belong to the class of "genuine unemployed workmen" are not created in times of distress. It only verifies the results of previous experiments in dealing with unemployed men: that this class of workingmen hold aloof from state-provided relief works; that machinery invented to benefit them will in all probability be taken over by that class of "underemployed" with whom, in the popular mind they are so frequently confused.

Where the present experiment is in a measure unique is in the opportunity which is offered by virtue of the three years' life of the act, to those in charge of its machinery, to declare openly, that however serviceable a "tiding-over" might be to those for whom the act was designed, it is not the proper method of assisting those by whom the act is used. For the remaining year that the act has to run a chance is offered for the valuable experiment of dealing honestly with this class on the basis of its own needs—a difficult task, without doubt; but is it not true that the real test of the success of any organization of this sort is its ability to deal with difficult tasks?

EDITH ABBOTT

WELLESLEY COLLEGE

¹⁷ "Preliminary Report," *op. cit.*, p. 55.